

*Terrorism, the Media and the Bombing of the USS Cole*

**An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)**

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Francine Friedman". The script is cursive and elegant, with the first letter of each name being capitalized and prominent.

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## Abstract

The role of the media in the reporting of terrorism has evolved and grown along with the development of technology. A poll in 2005 showed that six out of 10 Americans trust the media to report the news fairly and accurately, and do not take the time to verify the reported facts. Considering the current extensive coverage of international terrorism by most major news sources, the lack of fact checking by viewers gives the media the power to control the perception of terrorism in the majority of the U.S. population. There is no media accountability for the possibly inaccurate descriptions of supposed terrorism. I analyze what terrorism is, the media coverage of the USS Cole bombing in 2000 and the power the media has over the perception of terrorism to the people of the United States.

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On October 12, 2000, the United States Navy destroyer USS Cole was stationed in the Yemeni port of Aden under the authority of Commander Kirk S. Lippold. The USS Cole was refueling in the Aden harbor when a 35 foot boat carrying explosives RDX and TNT struck into the side of the ship, blowing a 32 foot by 36 foot hole and causing extensive internal damage that cost \$250 million to repair. The explosion killed seventeen people aboard the USS Cole and injured 47. Both of the attackers were also killed. The primary organization to take responsibility for this attack was Al-Qaeda, masterminded by Abd al Rahim Hussein Muhammed al Nashiri under the direction of Osama bin Laden, with the Islamic Army of Aden taking secondary responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

This bombing was immediately reported to the world as an act of terrorism. News sources all over the world reported the incident, broadcasting the image of the damaged destroyer and speculating on who was behind the attack. This case study aims to discuss the nature of terrorism and to explore the possibility of a disconnect between the media and reporting of terrorism.

Questions to consider: Does the media play too big a part in telling the world what terrorism is? Or is it the opposite, and if the media had a bigger role in the fight against terrorism, could tragic events like September 11<sup>th</sup> have been avoided? Do terrorists use the mass media to spread their message, knowing that



the whole world will hear about their acts within minutes? Is every “act of terrorism” reported truly terrorism? These questions by no means have definite, easily identifiable answers, but they are questions that need to be considered carefully.

My theory is that the media impact on the people of the United States’ view of terrorism is too big. Media just tells a small portion of the whole story, the sensational parts, and tends to spin the story however the station (or government or political party) sees as beneficial to them. What is reported as terrorism sometimes should be identified as other forms of violence and when it is reported as terrorism, people get the wrong understanding of what terrorism truly is. This will be explored later, but first we need to understand terrorism and the mass media.

### Terrorism

There is no universally accepted definition of terrorism. Almost every government in the world, if asked, would come up with a slightly different description.

According to the Constitutional Rights Foundation, the term ‘terrorism’ is bound up in political controversy. It is a concept with a very negative connotation.

“Because terrorism implies the killing and maiming of innocent people, no country wants to be accused of supporting terrorism or harboring terrorist groups. At the same time, no country wants what it considers to be a legitimate use of force to be considered terrorism.”<sup>2</sup>

In order to fight terrorism, it must first be defined. With a definitive definition, it becomes easier to collect and interpret data on terrorism. How is war fought against something undefined? A concept cannot be directly confronted.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation defines terrorism as “the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives.” The FBI further describes terrorism as either domestic or international, depending on the origin, base, and objectives of the terrorist organization...

- “Domestic terrorism is the unlawful use, or threatened use, of force or violence by a group or individual based and operating entirely within the United States or Puerto Rico without foreign direction committed against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof in furtherance of political or social objectives.
- International terrorism involves violent acts or acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or any state, or that would be a criminal violation if committed within the jurisdiction of the United States or any state. These acts appear to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population, influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion, or affect the conduct of a

government by assassination or kidnapping. International terrorist acts occur outside the United States or transcend national boundaries in terms of the means by which they are accomplished, the persons they appear intended to coerce or intimidate, or the locale in which their perpetrators operate or seek asylum.”<sup>3</sup>

This definition emphasizes defense in the face of terrorism. The U.S. State Department definition of terrorism is different, focusing instead on the goals of terrorism. According to the State Department, terrorism is “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetuated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups of clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.”<sup>4</sup> This definition is missing the psychological element of terrorism and lacks the realization that, in certain respects, terrorism is done purely for theatrical reasons.

The U.S. Department of Defense has yet another definition of terrorism: “the calculated use of – or threatened use of – force or violence against individuals or property to coerce or intimidate governments or societies, often to achieve political, religious or ideological objectives.”<sup>5</sup> This definition emphasizes the motives of terrorists.

These are just the definitions given by U.S. government offices, which all differ in significant ways. Thousands of definitions exist, each with specific distinctions about what is considered an act of terrorism and what is not. The definitional

impasse has prevented the United Nations from the adoption of a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism. "The prime reason is the standoff with the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). The Arab Terrorism Convention and the Terrorism Convention of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) define terrorism to exclude armed struggle for liberation and self-determination. This claim purports to exclude blowing up certain civilians from the reach of international law and organizations. It is central to interpreting every proclamation by the states, which have ratified these conventions in any UN forum purporting to combat terrorism. When it comes to agreeing to a comprehensive convention, the OIC is still looking for ways to exclude 'the activities of the parties during an armed conflict, including in situations of foreign occupation' from the purview of the Convention."<sup>6</sup>

Only three elements of terrorism are generally agreed on: there is a perpetrator, there is a target and there is a victim. A fourth element, usually shadowed and not discussed, is fear.

The concept that terrorism is a violent irrational act by a radical religious group to prove a point is not usually correct. Terrorism can actually be calculated and reasonable. There are generally two reasons terrorist acts are done. One is the desire to seek a radical change in the status quo. The second is to defend privileges that are possibly threatened.

Terrorist acts are usually committed because of the lack of ability to fight back any other way. If the government is oppressive and cruel and the citizens against the government do not have the resources to hold publicized anti-government campaigns or to buy the necessary equipment to create an army and stage a true war, the most effective way to get a point across is usually an act of violence. If the general population disagrees with the government, one terrorist act can spark a revolution and the terrorists gain followers, creating the possibility of an overthrow of power. Terrorism can be a shortcut to revolution, inspiring people to stand up and take control of their country.

Two phrases that have vastly different meanings but often are used interchangeably are “political terrorism” and “domestic violence.” Most of the time when political terrorism, or just terrorism, is mentioned by the media, the term used should have been domestic violence. Political terrorism is generally motivated by politics or religion while domestic violence is fueled by revenge, passion or hunger for profit. Political terrorism usually aims to create fear and panic while domestic violence wants to create fear of a crime. Terrorists target random victims while perpetrators of domestic violence generally know the victims. Terrorists use bombs, perpetrators of domestic violence use handguns. Terrorists acts are in public, domestic violence occurs in private. Terrorists have support; perpetrators of domestic violence do not.

Many of the news stories about “terrorism” are usually describing domestic violence. The rhetoric is important to get right in these situations. When a

teenage goes to school with a gun and shoots people who have been cruel to him or her, that is domestic violence. The act is fueled by revenge and/or passion, is aimed at creating fear of the crime, is personal and is in a private place. Stories of this nature are usually reported as acts of terrorism. When the media reports it as such, the listeners and viewers get an inaccurate understanding of what true terrorism actually is.

Since there is no universally accepted definition of terrorism, how the media reports “acts of terror” seems to be up to the government and the media personnel. The media reports it and the people listen and believe.

### The Media

According to a study conducted in the U.S. by Project for Excellence, in 2003 almost 79 percent of Americans received the majority of their news about national and international issues from television. Newspapers were second at 45 percent, the Internet following at 19 percent with radio and magazines falling last at 16 percent and 5 percent. “The myths circulated by television news help consumers of mass media to construct a worldview. This worldview in the long run can make the consumers accept as being ‘natural’ something which in fact is a manufactured reality, created to mask the real structures of global power. Thus global television now, controlled in the era of privatized airwaves by powerful corporate interests, can construct a mythical reality and encourage conformity to the value systems of the dominant groups in society. In this sense, the mass media play a crucial ideological role, promoting the values and interests of

dominant groups and implanting beliefs and representations that sustain and legitimize their domination.”<sup>7 pg 4</sup> Putting the creation of American worldviews in the hands of the media gives them a great deal of power.

“The mainstream press covers itself with the mantle of authority now. Six out of 10 Americans polled in 2005 trusted ‘the media’ to report the news ‘fully, fairly and accurately’... nearly two to one... But here’s a question: Can we continue to trust ourselves? Are we prepared for the global, 24-7 fake news cage match that will dominate journalism in the twenty-first century...the boundaries have vanished, the gloves are off, our opponents are legion and fueled with espresso. Both CNN and The New York Times were used by the U.S. military as unwitting co-conspirators in spreading false information, a tactic known as psychological operations, part of an effort to convince Americans the invasion of Iraq was a necessary piece of the war on terror...Besides a vast and sophisticated degree of diligence, the rising generation of journalists would be wise to observe two rules for working in this new environment: Beware of profiteers and hyper-patriots, and check out a little history—lest it repeat itself.”<sup>8</sup>

On May 26, 2004, the *New York Times* published an article telling its readers that the reporting done on the Iraq War might not have all been accurate. So many articles were published about the invasion of Iraq that not every story was thoroughly fact-checked before release and now, looking back, many of the

stories should not have been published. "...we have found a number of instances of coverage that was not as rigorous as it should have been. In some cases, information that was controversial then, and seems questionable now, was insufficiently qualified or allowed to stand unchallenged. Looking back, we wish we had been more aggressive in re-examining the claims as new evidence emerged — or failed to emerge."<sup>9</sup> Several articles from 2001 to 2003 are quoted, highlighting the contradictions about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, secret labs with weapons of chemical warfare, informant information and the support of the Iraqi people.

While it is noble of the *Times* to come out and directly apologize for their mistakes, it does not negate the fact that for three years people who trusted the *New York Times* read and believed information that was not thoroughly checked or verified. The millions of people who read the *Times* everyday were influenced by reports about the war and possibly formed opinions from inaccurate information. These people also probably shared those opinions with others who in turn shared them with others and on and on. The effects of inaccurate information from well-respected news media can only be estimated, but the damage is real and terrifying.

One (now) humorous but true example of the power of the media is the 1938 radio broadcast of Orson Welles' adaptation of the well-known book, *War of the*



*Worlds* by H. G. Wells. The radio broadcast announced at the beginning what the presentation was saying, "The Columbia Broadcasting System and its affiliated stations present Orson Welles and the Mercury Theatre on the Air in *The War of the Worlds* by H. G. Wells." Listeners still "panicked when they learned of the Martians' ferocious and seemingly unstoppable attack on Earth. Many ran out of their homes screaming while others packed up their cars and fled...All across the United States, listeners reacted. Thousands of people called radio stations, police and newspapers. Many in the New England area loaded up their cars and fled their homes. In other areas, people went to churches to pray. People improvised gas masks. Miscarriages and early births were reported. Deaths, too, were reported but never confirmed. Many people were hysterical. They thought the end was near.

Hours after the program had ended and listeners had realized that the Martian invasion was not real, the public was outraged that Orson Welles had tried to fool them. Many people sued. Others wondered if Welles had caused the panic on purpose.

The power of radio had fooled the listeners. They had become accustomed to believing everything they heard on the radio, without questioning it. Now they had learned - the hard way."<sup>10</sup> This example may be extreme and outdated, but it happened. Current technology has made it easier than ever to fabricate or manipulate media coverage of an event, making it nearly impossible to tell what is real.

Former ABC anchor Ted Koppel once said, “Let me put forward the proposition that the media, particularly television, and terrorists need one another, that they have what is fundamentally a symbiotic relationship. Without television, terrorism becomes rather like the philosopher’s hypothetical tree falling in the forest: no one hears it fall and therefore it has no reason for being. And television without terrorism, while not deprived of all interesting things in the world, is nonetheless deprived of one of the most interesting.” <sup>11</sup> pg 51 This statement was made in 1984, before the USS Cole bombing, before September 11<sup>th</sup>. If this was true in 1984, then in the 28 years since wouldn’t it make sense for the media to have evolved, making the process even more convoluted?

“...In the twenty-six days after the September 11 attacks, President Bush made fifty-four public statements... during this same period Osama bin Laden, even though he issued some statements via fax and prerecorded video, held no press conferences and granted no interviews. Yet, US broadcast media referred to bin Laden equally or more often. In the first two months of the war in Afghanistan, Bush made seventy-six public statements regarding the fight against terrorism. Again, bin Laden was either out-mentioned vis-a-vis Bush (nearly twice as frequently in the major US networks) or received almost equal coverage.<sup>12</sup> Terrorist rely on the fact that the media will do the job of broadcasting their message.

“...Mass media in the form of news media are often drawn (like entertainment media in books or movies) to stories that suggest conflict and the potential for what is shocking and sensational. Mainstream news media, of course, filter these requirements of conflict and the sensational through an initial requirement that a story also be of public interest. Stories describing terror violence almost always meet these requirements, for the violence first and foremost threatens public safety (thereby making it of public interest) and showcases conflict between terrorists and their target audience(s) in a manner that is increasingly dramatic and sensational.”<sup>13</sup> pg 135

An expert on international criminal law says “this paradox has created a situation in which terrorists are drawn to news media coverage because they desire maximum publicity for their messages, while media coverage of terrorism magnifies the threat and resulting fear of terrorism to the public. The desire for maximum publicity, in turn, creates a tendency in terrorist violence to select targets and engage in types of symbolic action that translate well visually in coverage and broadcast.”<sup>14</sup> pg 135 This creates an interesting conundrum.

Terrorists have realized that the larger and more violent their acts are, the more the media will cover it. But what is the media to do? Not covering the event leaves the public uninformed, which is unacceptable in this age of technology and immediate gratification.

Since the mass media has such a strong influence on the perceptions and opinions of the American public, it should be no surprise that the more the media reports on terrorism, the more popular it becomes as subject matter. Many prominent storytellers, novelists and filmmakers are attracted to the subject of terrorism and use terrorists as characters. Movies based on the 1972 Munich Olympics and September 11<sup>th</sup> became popular, exposing many people to the reality of terrorism and the impact it has had across the world.

Margaret Thatcher, former Prime Minister of Great Britain, saw the danger of giving terrorists press coverage. During the Bar Association conference in 1985, Thatcher urged that the media should not give terrorists mention in the world's newspapers or news broadcasts. "We must not play into their hands...The hijacker and the terrorist thrive on publicity. Without it, their activities and their influence are sharply curtailed...In our societies, we do not believe in constraining the media, still less in censorship," she said. "But ought we not to ask the media to agree among themselves a voluntary code of conduct under which they would not say or show anything which could assist the terrorists' morale or their cause while the hijack lasted?"<sup>15</sup>

More than 20 years later, Thatcher still has a valid point. Media censorship is not a democratic practice and in an era of abundant media and globalized networks that operate beyond the reach of domestic political structures, it is not clear that

censorship is even possible, but what about a code of ethics that, if adhered to by the media, could potentially lessen the number of tragic events that lead to the injury and death of innocent civilians and soldiers every day? Terrorists engage in acts of violence to make a statement. Maybe they disagree with the treatment of their people. Maybe they oppose the leadership of their country or an unjust law. Maybe they are just plain crazy. No matter what the reason, they engage in acts of violence that generally hurt many people and cause a great deal of damage. They do this because they know their message will be heard around the world, almost instantly.

Political theorists have been known to call the media the fourth branch of government. But while the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches check and balance each other, there is no check or balance for the media. Doctors, lawyers, teachers, law enforcement personnel: all who claim these professions must swear an oath that they will do their utmost to follow the laws, regulations and standards set by governing body of the profession, and, if they fail, they are held accountable for their actions. Journalists have no such accountability.

“Without the assistance of the media, terrorist rhetoric would influence only those in the immediate vicinity of terrorist violence and destruction. Conversely, with the assistance of media, terrorism reaches a much broader, sometimes global, audience- and in an era in which most people (at least in the United States) get

their political information from television, mass-mediated depictions of terrorism can have a profound effect upon the way we think about and engage in discourse about terrorism.”<sup>16</sup> pg 11

Doctors are charged with the responsibility of maintaining or improving the health of a person. Lawyers are in charge of ensuring that those in the legal system have a fair trial or those who have been abused find justice. Teachers educate future leaders and innovators. Law enforcement personnel protect civilians from deviants and control chaos. All these professions are necessary and noble, but the media is just as influential. With one false, misleading (but seemingly genuine) broadcast, the media can sway the American people on any issue without fear of serious retribution. There is no code of ethics that the media must adhere to. Fear of reputation damage is about the only check or balance to keep the media in line.

### The USS Cole Bombing

In the immediate aftermath of the USS Cole bombing, all major U.S. news sources made it front-line news. Speculation about where the attack came from, who was responsible, how many casualties there were and why the attack happened were rampant. Osama bin Laden was the immediate suspect considering the recent occurrence of violence from the August 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

“In less than three months, from October 12, 2000 , when suicide bombers struck the USS Cole, to December 31, 2000, CBS News devoted 252 segments to the incident, ABC News 163, NBC News 109, the *New York Times* 79 and NPR 24.”<sup>17</sup> pg 85

When terrorist acts happen, coverage of the event is a highlighted news story, at least for a couple months. Every station has the story as front-line news for several weeks, then as a secondary story and eventually it just fades away. Months or even years go by without any mention of the event, the people involved or the families who lost loved ones. The terrorists involved in the event get what they want, free publicity, and the media gets what they want, a dramatic story.

“As the mass media transmitted, highlighted, and replayed pictures of the hole in the Cole’s hull, the bloody faces of the injured, the flag-draped caskets of the killed, and the teary-eyed relatives of the victims, all over the globe people saw images that added up to a stunning David and Goliath metaphor: A powerful symbol of the world’s most formidable military superpower was incapacitated by members and/or agents of a comparatively weak group unable to fight the might United States in open warfare.”<sup>18</sup> pg 7 After the bombing of the USS Cole, terrorism became an issue in U.S. politics with politicians using the incident to cite why strong leadership was needed. “What a feast it must have been for the designers

of the USS Cole attack, when they learned about the incident's elevation to a heated campaign issue in the target country, the United States; from their perspective this was mass-mediated terrorism at its best.”<sup>19</sup> pg 9

The perpetrators of the USS Cole bombing got what they wanted. The media coverage spread like wildfire and almost everyone in the world with access to television or Internet knew about the incident within a day of it happening. The media played right into Al-Nashiri and Osama bin Laden's hands, telling the world about their disdain for the United States and their defiance of U.S. military power.

After hearing relatively nothing about the attack for ten years, the story has recently been brought back into public attention. “In the days after the attack, President Clinton vowed retribution against the terrorists. ‘You will not find a safe harbor,’ he proclaimed. ‘We will find you and justice will prevail.’”<sup>20</sup> This was an empty threat, as it took almost two years to put Al-Nashiri behind bars. Finally, mastermind Al-Nashiri was imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay and has been there for the last nine years. Al-Nashiri was just arraigned in the first death-penalty military commission under President Obama in January 2012.

Al-Nashiri was allowed to give a performance in front of the cameras. One description of his trial said that “...he glanced back at the public gallery, where



victims' relatives, members of the media and human rights activists sat behind three panes of glass. He then raised his right arm and gave an insouciant wave."<sup>21</sup>

Twelve years after the destruction he caused, Al-Nashiri is still broadcasting his message loud and clear. Al-Qaeda is not afraid of the American justice system and will continue to be defiant and destructive. This message is being shared all over the world. The families who lost their sons, husbands and fathers in the bombing are made to remember it all over again.

The arraignment of Abd al Rahim Hussein Muhammed al Nashiri does give the families of lost soldiers hope. "We've taken a big step today ... there will be justice," said Sandra Flannigan, the mother of a sailor killed in the attack on the USS Cole."<sup>22</sup> Al-Nashiri made no plea against the charges of " 'perfidy,' or treachery; murder in violation of the law of war; attempted murder in violation of the law of war; terrorism; conspiracy; intentionally causing serious bodily injury; attacking civilians; attacking civilian objects; and hazarding a vessel."<sup>23</sup> While this is a step in the right direction, the prosecution said they will need at least a year to prepare for trial. That means that for at least the next year, Al-Nashiri will be imprisoned and alive, giving the families of the murdered USS Cole soldiers no closure. And of course the media will be covering all of it and excitedly waiting to broadcast the trial.

“As far as questions about whether enough attention was paid to the Cole bombing in its immediate aftermath... the denouement of the story wasn't all that much different from many other major stories that simply run out of steam.”<sup>24</sup> Run out of steam? The media played out the newsworthiness of the bombing and then stopped reporting on the incident. While this is not uncommon, it does not do anything positive for any of the involved parties.

“The Clinton administration ‘never had any evidence to launch another strike,’ said Martin, so ‘the Cole started to no longer be a daily news story because there was no subsequent action that would keep it alive. But it started to, like all news stories, run its course and there weren't any new developments to keep it alive -- this happens with every news event.”<sup>25</sup>

“As far as criticisms that the media didn't spend enough time covering the threat of Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden before 9/11, Martin disagrees. ‘I've obviously done more stories on terrorism since 9/11, but we didn't have a war on terror before 9/11, and that took everything to a different level.”<sup>26</sup> So does the media pay too much attention to terrorism? Not enough? Or does the media even accurately report on what terrorism truly is? The complexity of these questions leads many to believe that an answer may never surface. Only time will tell what terrorism becomes. The media is an integral part of today's society. Without it,

many would be lost. Knowing what is going on in the world has changed the face of history.

Koppel once said, "There is a great need to be aware of the proper roles in our society of journalists as well as of political leaders. When our leaders don't play the roles they should be playing, then the media is put in a totally irrational position. After all, it is not the job of the media to censor itself. Vietnam was mentioned a few minutes ago. Press censorship was never imposed during the Vietnam War because President Johnson was unwilling to pay the political price of a declaration of war. If indeed our leaders believe that we are in a state of war, then let it be declared. Once war is declared, then all kinds of societal pressures, and indeed legal pressures, come to bear on the media to play a different role than the one it plays right now.

But I urge you not to be in too much of a hurry to change the role that we in the media play, because once it has been changed, even for reasons that now seem valid, it may be difficult to change it back when the reasons are no longer so valid." <sup>27</sup>

The media plays many important roles in society: informant, entertainer, international liaison, educator, companion. With this great power comes great responsibility to the people of the United States and to the world. Accountability is the key to ensuring that the media stops taking advantage of the trusting nature

of the American people. Hold the media accountable for their actions. Checks and balances work for the other three branches of government; it is time to extend that concept to the media.

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